

Are We Only for Ourselves?

Words versus intentions? Last month I wrote to you about the limitations of words spoken or written for their own sake, about how we need more caring, more intention, in our lives. And so, now what – do we do nothing, simply walking around with good thoughts? I think we'd all agree that that's not enough. Good words are wonderful and good intentions are wonderful, but without deeds to back them up our intentions are left inert and reality never changes. In the end, the grand expression of a holy life is not so much a question of what do *I* speak or even what do *I* intend but rather what do *we* do. It is that approach that puts us and others in the world forward.

It has been widely reported that President Obama recently held a phone meeting with more than 1,000 Rabbis – an incredible first for Jews in the United States. He began that meeting with the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, so central to Rosh Hashanah, and spoke about communal responsibility. While I was already going to write my message to you about building a richer, spiritual life, in the coming year, I could not allow this moment to pass without notice: As a student and teacher of Jewish history, the various lessons of this event are not lost on me.

The intersection between national and world events and our Jewish calendar this year is uncanny. The central theme of the Days of Awe is a resetting of the clock – the communal clock we call a calendar, the clock of our moral lives, the clock of our congregation, and most certainly the clock marking the shared moments of our communal lives. This theme is expressed in the constant framing of the prayers we recite and sing in the plural – what happens to us, happens to others, and what others experience, we experience as well. We cannot escape this reality during this time of year; it is central to how Jews and our heritage have always understood the Universe.

We read in the *Unetaneh Tokef*: *On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, And on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass away and how many shall be born, Who shall live and who shall die, Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not . . . Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued, Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented, Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low, Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.* But it is through our actions, the prayer goes on to remind us, that we can lessen or negate God's decree: *u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et ro'ah hag'zeirah – Repentance, Prayer, and Good Works/Charity avert the severe decree.*

The Days of Awe do not allow us to separate our fate from the fate of our fellow Jews, from our fellow human beings. Having been without health insurance, without needed medical care, and without the money needed to see medical professionals for periods of my life, I see the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer in a similar light to how I understand the *Aleinu* – it is upon *us* to make the world better, to be God's actors in this realm, and to think as much or more about our fellow than ourselves.

Let us take the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* and make them our charge in the coming year. Let us vow to consider our own spiritual health, a central focus of which is certainly to be of service to ideals (and individuals) beyond the scope of our own narrow benefit. It is by following God's example in not forgetting a single soul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that we can ensure we are on God's path as we follow our life's journey. If you need practical

ideas on actualizing these values, please contact me; I will be happy to share them with you.

May we receive the blessing of God's redemption for this coming year and may we share that redemption with our neighbors. In doing so, may we all be blessed to share the precious gift of good health and happiness in the year to come.

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